Los Angeles Times
13 October 1968

CIA in Vietnam Shifting Toward Old Role: Spying

Involvement in Overt Jobs Had Grown, but Focus Now Is on the Clandestine

BY WILLIAM TUOHY
Times Staff Writer

SAIGON—The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency is shifting toward a more traditional role in Vietnam—spying. Or, more formally, intelligence gathering and analysis, and clandestine operations.

For years the CIA has been involved in a variety of so-called "open" activities not generally associated with the classic secret mission of the agency.

does not like to get mixed up in long-term, open-ended programs such as the Revolutionary Development setup. And, when it did get the job, the military bridled at what it obviously felt was intervention in its special field.

Men of Special Breed

The CIA men tend to be a special breed. In the field, they run to tall, lean, suntanned types who characteristically respond to introductions with a tight-lipped: "John Smith, Embassy."

In Saigon, they tend to live together in apartment blocks or compounds, keeping to themselves professionally and socially, aloof from outsiders.

"There's no particular mystique about them," one insider said. "They have the same problems everyone else does: they worry about their families at home, paying the mortgage on the house, getting their kids through school. The divorce rate is high. One man on his second tour who likes the work and would extend if possible was told by his wife that he better get home after this tour is up if he still wants a wife."

Other Assigned Duties

However, in addition to classic functions, the CIA has at various times in Vietnam supplied funds and manpower to train Montagnard tribal troops, provided political reporting from the provinces; trained the police "special branch," the counterintelligence arm; set up the Revolutionary Development centers and trained the 59-man, black-pajama cadres; helped establish "Operation Phoenix," the local intelligence apparatus designed to attack the Viet Cong infrastructure; trained "provincial reconnaissance units," the counter-terror teams who assassinate enemy leaders; advised at the National Interrogation Center where enemy prisoners are questioned, and supplied the basic intelligence on the activities of the National Liberation Front.

Also, the CIA has lent

always been low on the priority list here, despite the fact that many counterinsurgency experts believe that a first-rate police force is more necessary than a good army.

Training of Police

The agency also trained the police "special branch."

As one observer put it: "You can't expect a retired Chicago police captain working for AID to know much about setting up intelligence networks. So the spooks got the job."

The CIA's reputation reached a low point in Vietnam in 1963 when Diem's secret police helped repress the Buddhists, and the CIA station chief, as the director in each country is called, drew public criticism though President John F. Kennedy later commended him.

There was some grumbling at the time that the station chief was trying to establish his own foreign policy.

But that period passed, and, since then, the four subsequent station chiefs have all worked well with the U.S. ambassador.

In the early 1960s the CIA took over the burden of training and arming the Montagnards, the tribal people who live along highland border infiltration routes and who were traditionally antipathetic to Vietnamese leadership. Later, the Montagnard training mission was turned over to the Army's Special Forces.

Role in RD Program

The agency's role in the Revolutionary Development program grew out of an experiment by two energetic Americans who worked for the U.S. Information Agency.

Working with the youth branch of a local political party in Quang Ngai province, they gave intensive, motivational training to 30-man groups known as "PATs," or political action teams.

The teams were designed to counter Viet Cong activity in the hamlets and win the people over to the government. They were remarkably successful in Quang Ngai.

Pacification experts then decided to mass-produce such teams for all of Vietnam's differing 44 provinces. But the job was too delicate for the U.S. Information Agency.

"It really wasn't our line" explains one USIA official.

"What if Indira Gandhi, say, learned that the USIA was arming Vietnamese peasants to fight other Vietnamese. She might decide that our personnel in India was up to the same tricks and throw us out."

Handed Responsibility

The CIA did not want to get involved in the Revolutionary Development program either.

But then Dep. Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson decided to hand the CIA the responsibility.

"Johnson knew that if you wanted to get a job done, you got the agency to do it," said an embassy man.

After that, the CIA's "paras" — paramilitary types—began arriving in Vietnam to work in the program.

"I began running into guys I hadn't seen since China, Burma, and the Chinese offshore islands," one old East Asian hand remarked.

At first the program ran afoul of the military and Gen. William C. Westmoreland, then U.S. military commander in Vietnam and now Army Chief of Staff.

"Westy refused to give them so much as a poncho," one official commented.

But the CIA has its own resources, and the station chief ordered mortars flown in from Okinawa to protect the teams.

Westmoreland was nettled by this. Losing his usual cool at a U.S. Mission council meeting, the general reportedly asked the station chief: "What are you bucking for, corps commander?"

Westmoreland View

Westmoreland's view, according to reliable sources, was: "If the teams are so good why aren't they in the armed forces?"

In the spring of 1966, it was suggested that the CIA get out of the Revolutionary Development business and turn it over to "open" operators like AID or the military.

But, by then, the station chief had decided that not only was the program successful, but it could provide an invaluable tool for countering insurgencies elsewhere.

He viewed the expertise gained as a "training machine" which could be readily shifted to places like Thailand or the Congo.

As one source said: "The RD program was forced down the agency's throat but they didn't want to cough it up again."

As of now, however, the Defense Department has taken over funding of the RD program, and CIA personnel at the training centers at Vung Tau near Saigon and Pleiku in the central Highlands will be replaced by military men or AID contract employees.

"I think this is a good thing for the agency's sake," one U.S. official said. "If the agency is going to survive, it has to be limited to clandestine operations — small, high-caliber, short-term, high-concentration efforts with a minimum of visibility. The RD program was not this kind of thing."

In the future, according to some sources, the CIA effort will be concentrated on intelligence information gathering and analyzing functions where they have done their best work in Vietnam. They will also take advantage of opportunitites for clandestine operations, which are now opening up.

Most observers believe the CIA's field reporting has been excellent. The U.S. Embassy relies on their reports not only on Viet Cong activities but in the political and economic areas as well.

"There are 44 provinces in Vietnam," one source explained, "and there are less than 10 Foreign Service officers in the political section of the embassy. So the grass-roots reporting comes from the agency, because there isn't anybody else out in the grass. When you meet a lone American in the boondocks, you can usually bet that he's a spook."

Analysis Success

The agency has been particularly successful, sources say, in its analysis of enemy strength and capability, and usually more correct in its assessments than the military services' intelligence agencies.

However, by moving into "open" programs, critics say, the agency stretched itself too thin.

"They had to recruit some personnel who were definitely second-rate," says one observer.

And their many activities—often forced on them by Washington decisions —have kept agency men from focusing sharply on areas best suited to their skills, such as the "Phoenix" program.

"We were very late getting into this," one U.S. official admitted. "Going after the enemy infrastructure is something that should start right at the beginning of the effort."

Nor has the CIA been notably successful in penetrating the Viet Cong.

"Penetrating the Communists is always difficult," one source said. "And penetrating Asian Communists is doubly difficult. You need a lot of time—two years working with an agent to build up a relationship. So you have to have continuity and you can't dissipate your efforts."

Vital Need Stressed

Whatever its successes and failures, in the view of many observers here, the role of the CIA in Vietnam emphasizes the need within the American government for an organization that can effectively combat Communist-inspired wars of national liberation."

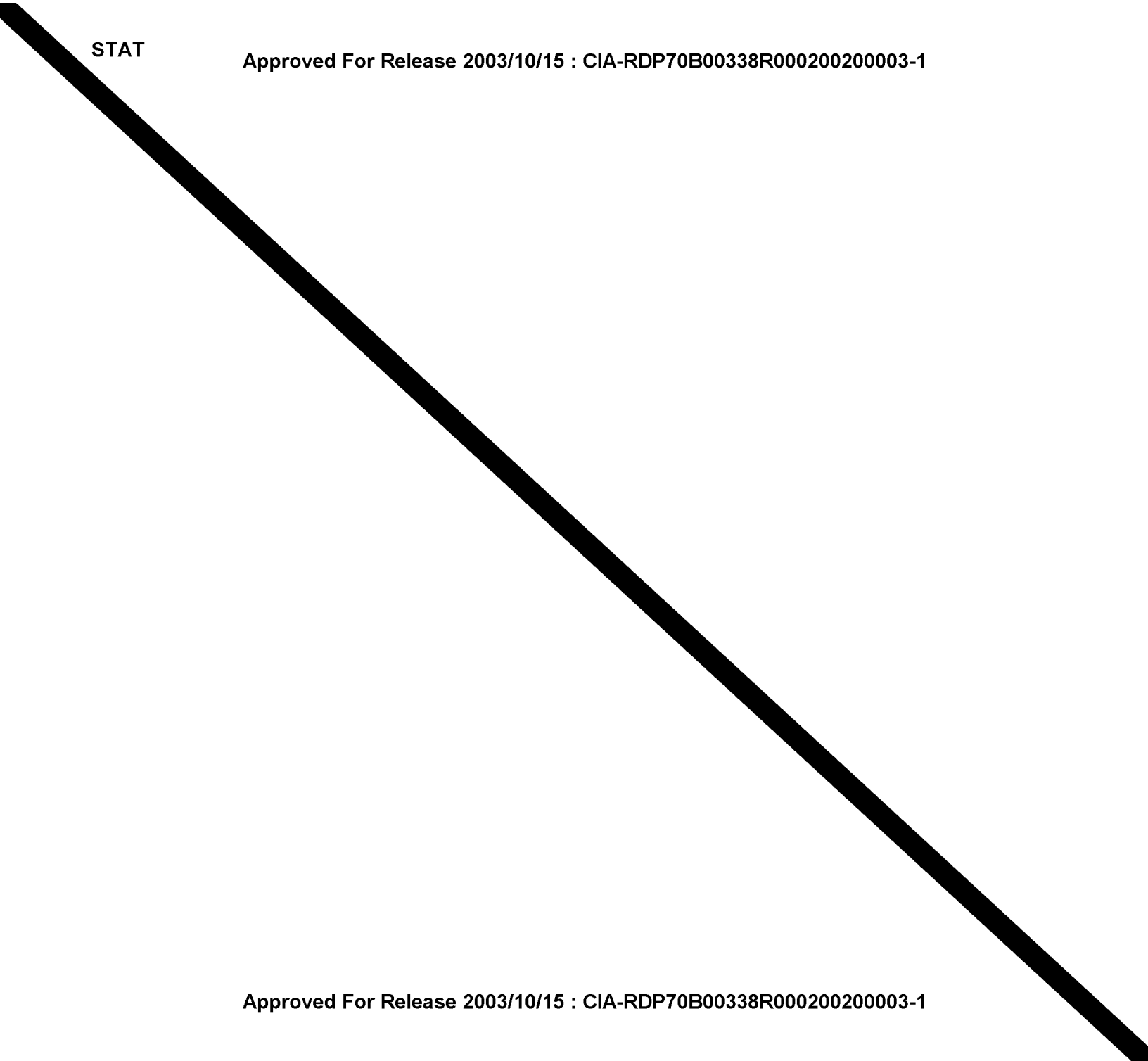
Continued

The "Cords" pacification operation is organized somewhat along such lines. But it is a temporary expedient for Vietnam, and pacification chief Robert Komer has no referrent agency in Washington, except the President.

Experienced officials here believe that some sort of paramilitary organization — incorporating certain functions of the CIA and Cords—should be set up, in Washington, probably under Defense Department auspices, with personnel loaned to it from the parent agencies: State, Defense, CIA, AID, USIA, etc.

Such an organization presumably would have the expertise to analyse the situation in a given country, decide whether the United States could effectively help, and have the kind of men who knew how to assist a nation fighting a totalitarian insurgency.

"If and when we have to assist another country whose freedom is being menaced," one observer here said, "then we ought to be better prepared than we were in Vietnam."



Approved For Release 2003/10/15 : CIA-RDP70B00338R000200200003-1